

WRITING SNAPPY DIALOGUE

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Dialogue is drama. Characters' dialogue characteristics can/should conflict with each other, just the way their ideas and emotions and opinions do. Characters should be as different in speech as they are in action. And sometimes those differing ways of communicating will **cause** conflict.

Let characters not listen to each other. In real life, people often don't reply to each other's bits of dialogue; instead they go off on their own tangents. They might have their own agenda or inner conflict they keep worrying at instead of listening -- or they may be distracted by action. The techy term for this is "talk past each other."

"It's all about people talking about their own thing, talking past each other. The concept has a long literary history; see, for instance, the dialogue between Thrysymachus and Socrates in *The Republic*. The Chinese expression is *a chicken talking to a duck*."

"Dude, have you seen my glasses?"

"Listen to me. I'm talking about *dialogue*. Which is *art*. You can listen without your glasses."

"Because seriously, man, I think the dog ate my glasses. He's making these funny crunching sounds and coughing and stuff."

"My mother never paid any attention to me. No one pays attention to me. I might as well not *have* a doctorate. What are you doing with your fingers down that beast's throat?"

"Can you get me like a couple chopsticks? Fast?"

Steal from life. Write down things you hear around you. One good sentence can create a whole character. Listen to people! Listening to the way real people use language can shed light on different characters you may want to write.

Do your research. Making up slang or phrasing for people who exist, now or in our past, will fall flat, and can be downright offensive. (This has different considerations in settings removed from our reality, such as secondary world fantasy characters, or distant-future scifi.)

Read your dialogue out loud, tags and all. It'll help you figure out where tags are needed to indicate the speaker, where they might be redundant, and of course, where your words might just sound clunky.

Note: the way you read your dialogue isn't necessarily the way other people will read it. If you find you have to stress particular words to get the point across, and saying it "wrong" would break the meaning, the sentence probably needs a rewrite.

Leapfrog the obvious. Not every greeting and comment needs to be on the page. You might need to write every line in a first draft, but don't be afraid to cut the chaff and leave only dialog that moves the plot or illuminates character.

Tips and tricks to differentiate characters

- Pay attention to sentence length and structure. This can and should be varied from character to character. Think of long run-on sentences versus pithy one-liners or fragments.
- Different people's voices have different rhythms. Using distinctive rhythms -- think of meter and foot in poetry -- helps differentiate voices.

- What slang would a character use? What localism or colloquialism might they employ that another character never would? Listen to real people who use slang to get it right.
- Most people don't speak in full, grammatically correct sentences. *How* does your character break the rules? Do they break with modern conventions to sound historical, or the opposite?
- Imitate style: Similar to accents is finding a piece of writing that implies a character and imitating it; this works particularly well with historical characters. One of us based a fussy bachelor character who liked children on Lewis Carroll's preface to *Sylvie and Bruno*. Mark Gatiss is a notable Victorian imitator (he's written Victorian porn, the dear man) and did something similar for Mycroft Holmes.

Narrative can be speech. Certain points of view stay in the mind of a single character. If you use first person or third person limited POV, remember that everything seen directly from a character's POV is "dialogue" and should follow this advice, too.

Things not to do

- Overuse adverbs, AKA the infamous "Tom Swift." "'I'm falling!' shouted Tom swiftly." Carefully-deployed adverbs can work, but improving dialogue or the narrative around it is more effective and subtle. You can write attitude better than you can describe it.
- Accents. It can be really fun now and then to experiment with writing everybody in different accents (even Ze 'Orrible Cliched Fransh Accent), just to see how far you can differentiate characters. It might even be useful in a first draft, to help you get into the rhythm of different characters' voices. But be aware that this will also put a lot of readers off, obscure the content of the dialogue, and is extremely difficult to do sensitively. If you think you've done it inoffensively, you're probably wrong. Strip it out before you try submitting it anywhere. Even in historical fiction, never, never, never use outdated cliches of accents or dialect that denigrate people.

Resource links

[The POC Guide to Writing Dialect In Fiction](http://www.tor.com/2016/11/02/the-poc-guide-to-writing-dialect-in-fiction/) (Tor.com)

<http://www.tor.com/2016/11/02/the-poc-guide-to-writing-dialect-in-fiction/>

[The 7 Tools of Dialogue](http://www.writersdigest.com/online-editor/the-7-tools-of-dialogue) (Writer's Digest)

<http://www.writersdigest.com/online-editor/the-7-tools-of-dialogue>

[9 Easily Preventable Mistakes Writers Make with Dialogue](http://www.thecreativepenn.com/2012/10/04/dialogue-mistakes/) (The Creative Penn)

<http://www.thecreativepenn.com/2012/10/04/dialogue-mistakes/>

[How to write dialogue](https://johnaugust.com/2007/how-to-write-dialogue) and [The challenge of writing good dialogue](https://johnaugust.com/2004/the-challenge-of-writing-good-dialogue) (John August, screenwriter)

<https://johnaugust.com/2007/how-to-write-dialogue>

<https://johnaugust.com/2004/the-challenge-of-writing-good-dialogue>